THE GOLDEN SHOWER OF PROSPERITY FALLS ON CUBA

Sugar Crop Exceeds 3,000,000 Tons, Thrice the Greatest Under Spanish Rule, and Worth $200,000,000

Purchase of Chain of Plantations by American Syndicate Also Pours $50,000,000 Cash Into Island

By JOSEPH I. C. CLARKE.

THIS is the golden year of Cuba. The golden shower falls on her from every quarter of the horizon, and all she is asked for in return is the fruit of her fertile fields—sugar mostly. And for this she gets higher prices than in many years, and she has more than ever to sell.

Before her 190 estates cease grinding this year her centrifugals will have sent racing down into the gaping sacks over 3,000,000 tons of sugar, worth over $200,000,000. Before the insurrection of 1896 the most she had ever made under Spanish rule was a little over a million tons. Better machinery, wider fields, higher extraction, increased demand and growing enterprise have brought about one side of the change; the European war—the world war—the other.

So the cane carts crack, the ox teams pull, the railroad cane cars roll along, the cane conductors rustle, the crushers tear the cane, the huge mills one after the other squash it, the rivers of juice pour out in milky cascades, all with a heavy basso profundo rumble that throbs and pulsates and meets the tenor shriek of steam by morn and noon and night. Out in the fields an army of 120,000 men are cutting cane; mill owners happy, cane farmers delighted—good cane and plenty and higher prices. Every one profits. Verily the Cuban goose hangs high.

But that is not all, far from it, for in this year of grace, from another, an unexpected, source another great shower of gold is pouring over Cuba. An American company, the Cuban Cane Sugar Company, is paying $50,000,000 in cash for less than a score of sugar plantations; already half a score have been paid for, and it is only a question of the days which the meticulous Cuban lawyers require to get the papers in order that delays settlement with the rest of the Cuban owners. This money, coming in nuggets of $2,000,000, $4,000,000, $6,000,000, has been a startling surprise to Cuba.

Handed over to individuals, partnerships or small and close corporations, the business world of Cuba has stood amazed. What will they do with it? asks one. What can they do with it? asks another. Most of them make infantile guesses and give it up. For the financial and business interests of Cuba are mostly of the old Spanish element, set and narrow in their ways, seeing as with piercing, diamond eyes in a twelve foot circle and refusing resolutely to see an inch beyond. Patient, persistent, shrewd traders they be, but it is hard to interest them in anything they have not done before, and whoever heard of buying seventeen fincas in a bunch and paying cash for them!

The cause of it all is not far to seek. Like all great ideas it was very simple. It meant a group of American bankers seeking profitable outlet for some of the vast hoard of millions piling up in the bank vaults of New York, Boston and Philadelphia. The marvel in it was how they found the only man who could swing the great gilded net for them over the Caribbean and land the desired fishes.

The man is Manuel Rionda, a native of northern Spain, now in his fifties, who came to the United States in his sixteenth year, following the footsteps of two elder brothers, Joaquin and Francisco. They sent him to a boarding school in Maine to learn English, which he readily acquired, and then he joined them in business in New York. This lay mostly in the import and export of things Spanish and things Cuban, and later it led to their setting up as sugar planters at Tuinucu, near Sancti Spiritus, in what is now Santa Clara province, the central province of Cuba.

For a time young Manuel was with his brothers in Tuinucu, learning the business of the cane planter and the sugar maker as it flourished then, and in great stead the experience stood him later on. He returned to New York upon a flattering business offer, and thenceforth for many years dealt there in the great Cuban staple with increasing knowledge and grasp.

First associated with the late Juan M. Ceballos, he next joined the firm of Czarnikow, MacDougall & Co. as a partner—the firm which, on the death of Mr. Czarnikow and the retirement of Mr. MacDougall, became a few years ago the firm of Czarnikow-Rionda. I cannot say what proportion—about two-thirds—of the cane sugar business of the United States the firm handles, but it is the high rock in the cane sugar landscape at the foot of Wall street and may act as medium of exchange of cash for sugar to the tune of over two million tons a year, out of a total American consumption, cane and beet, of four million tons.

This enormous business Manuel Rionda built up with his own two hands, backed wholly at first by the Czarnikow cash from London. It was a man's struggle between the ever needy often purse proud producers of sugar on one side and the great refineries of the United States on the other. Whoever went up against the domineering power of the American Sugar Company when H. O. Havemeyer personified it and came away with a whole financial skin was something of a commission merchant.

The struggle had its scene in Cuba as well as in the United States. In 1895 Cuban discontent with Spanish rule broke out after seventeen years of peace in the uprising that was to culminate in Cuban independence. It meant ruin to the rising sugar interests of Cuba particularly, and almost immediately to those in central and eastern Cuba. The rebels boldly ordered all sugar grinding to cease; the Captain-General ordered the sugar grinding to go on. The planters found themselves between the devil and the deep sea.

Francisco Rionda, the then surviving older brother of Manuel, was in charge at Tuinucu. Joaquin had been drowned a previous year in attempting to ride his horse at night across the Tuinucu River, risen at flood fifty feet above its normal. A man of great natural ability and foresight, Francisco had struggled long for a co-operative union among the planters of Cuba, and once when success seemed certain a year of financial panic intervened and ended the experiment disastrously. In 1895 he faced another calamity.

Taken from the casa de vivienda at nightfall by a group of rebel horsemen, he was brought before the rebel commander of the region, who was no other than Jose Miguel Gomez, later Governor of Santa Clara, still later President of Cuba and now a probable candidate for reelection—a man of force and will.

"Pancho," said he familiarly, for they had been old friends, "if you light your fires in the ingenio I'll burn your cane, and as to yourself, why, I should regret it, but——"

Francisco returned to his home. Next day a company of Spanish troops marched into the batey, its commander bringing orders for Francisco to start grinding under penalty of being declared a traitor to Spain. So Pancho started the furnace fires.

The column of smoke poured out of the tall stack at early morn. In an hour it was answered by a flash of flame and a rolling cloud of smoke above the cane fields a couple of miles away, and all that day and night and for days and nights thereafter the flames roared and swept the miles and miles of cane until the smiling land of green was one wilderness of smoking, blackened ruin. The Spanish soldiers never lifted a hand to interfere. Francisco and his family fled over night to Sancti Spiritus and so to New York for the remainder of the war.

Tuinucu lay in the hot centre of the fighting, now held by the Spanish, now by the patriot forces. All the little dwellings of the working forces were burned by one side or the other. They fought and skirmished all over the place. The batey was a graveyard, but because Francisco—"Pancho"—was personally beloved by the fighting Cubans and was respected highly by the fighting Spaniards the sugar mill and the dwelling house, though occupied in turn by each side, was spared from the flames by both. At the close of the war Francisco made an effort, although in failing health, to revive his fortunes. Tuinucu he found a stark desolation. He died of a broken heart.

Here then was the lamentable situation that seventeen years ago loomed before Manuel Rionda. It was typical of what all agricultural Cuba had to face. He loved Tuinuca with the passion of his land loving people. He loved his family with the racial intensity of the Spaniard for his clan, and with enormous courage he set about the rebuilding, the restoration of Tuinucu.

It seems ridiculous now that the first year the rusted gear wheels turned and the old mill crushed the corn the crop was but little over 3,000 bags, yet it was hailed with triumph. The next was over 5,000 bags; to-day its great mills, vast vacuum pans, its crystallizers and whirring centrifugals turn out 180,000 bags between December and the opening of May. Surely there is something in sugar in Cuba.

So, in fine, it came about that Manuel Rionda grew intimately to know the ins and outs of Cuba's sugar industry as few knew it, combining the detailed knowledge of the Cuban with the larger view of the American business men and financiers. He had learned two basic facts: first that the sugar planter suffered much loss of profit from his annual necessity of meeting his loans on time, and second that great economic loss resulted from the competition among mill owners for cane to feed their ever expanding mills. It was not merely that the cane grower got abnormally high prices among competitors near at hand, but that the mill owners would invade any district within fifty miles, paying enormous freight bills in addition to advanced prices.

Another fact had impressed itself upon the entire industry, namely, that the small sugar mill of the olden days was impossible to work at a profit. No ingenio turning out less than 100,000 bags was workable year in and year out. In a year like this, with prices at from 3 to 3½ cents a pound at the factory, it could be done, but let the rate fall back to the 2 cents or 2½ of 1913 for two or three years and bankruptcy would follow.

Thus it was that the man of the hour found himself, and as I have said at the beginning of this article, was found. The great war contracts for munitions and foodstuffs were piling up their millions of profits in the United States and money was eating its head off for want of occupation. It is neither here nor there to say which side of the proposition made the first advances for the great New York move on the Cuban sugar business. I suspect that it came from the side of knowledge and that cash jumped at it. So in the last month of 1915 it was fairly under way.

The New York bankers opened a subscription for a fund of $50,000,000; before New Year's Day $80,000,000 had been offered. The idea was to purchase a selected group of Cuban estates on a plan of which the details have not been made known, but it included the largest, the best equipped with machinery, the best provided with a supply of cane. It is useless to name plantations and properties in an article of this general nature for the American public, but inside a month options had been secured on seventeen of the largest, most powerful in the island. The seventeen estates total 3,500,000 bags out of an island total of 21,000,000 bags at a total cost of $45,000,000. It covers one-sixth of the output of Cuba entire. There is the purchase in a nutshell. It is henceforth to be cracked and the meat therein eaten.

"What," I asked Manuel Rionda the other day, "is Cuba's greatest need now that capital sufficient for her wants is here or in sight?"

"A hundred thousand able-bodied workingmen," he answered. "There is work for all that number all the year round.

"It is hard to instil ambition into the Cuban field hand. He is content to work three days in the week if therein he has secured the cost of living comfortably for the remaining four. He eats well, for food is cheap. Outside that his wants are few and he is averse to increasing them.

"We have some betterment in this. Children are better cared for; their education is better looked after. I believe in schools, in education that uplifts and teaches something of the world outside the limits of the cane field.

"A shortage in labor is the greatest difficulty ahead of Cuba; low prices for sugar do not compare with it, for low prices follow high ones with a compensating swing, and must be looked forward to by the wise. We want more workers."

Such are the conditions under which the new company from the United States enters into the life of agricultural Cuba. In a way it is only its money that enters, displacing a score or less of owners, mostly men of Spanish race who came or whose fathers or at most whose grandfathers came poor from Spain with nothing but a shrewd brain and a pair of tireless arms. As a general thing the prosperity which landed them in a position to demand two millions, four millions, six millions for their properties has been the creation of the eighteen years since the war, indeed of the sixteen years of the present century, for Cuba in 1899 and 1900 was barely stirring to life under the ashes of its holocaust upon the altar of freedom.

Tuinucu, as I have said, was only a type of the devastation. The cane fields lay black under the sun, the factories had been burned and dismantled, the huts and houses of the working folk burned, vanished, the people themselves decimated, scattered. The cattle that had roamed the fields in thousands had been eaten; horses were few. But the soil, the wonderful soil under the mercy of the rain and at the long trumpet call of the sun went on with its miracles, and Cuba, out of the agony of rebirth, came swiftly to its own again.

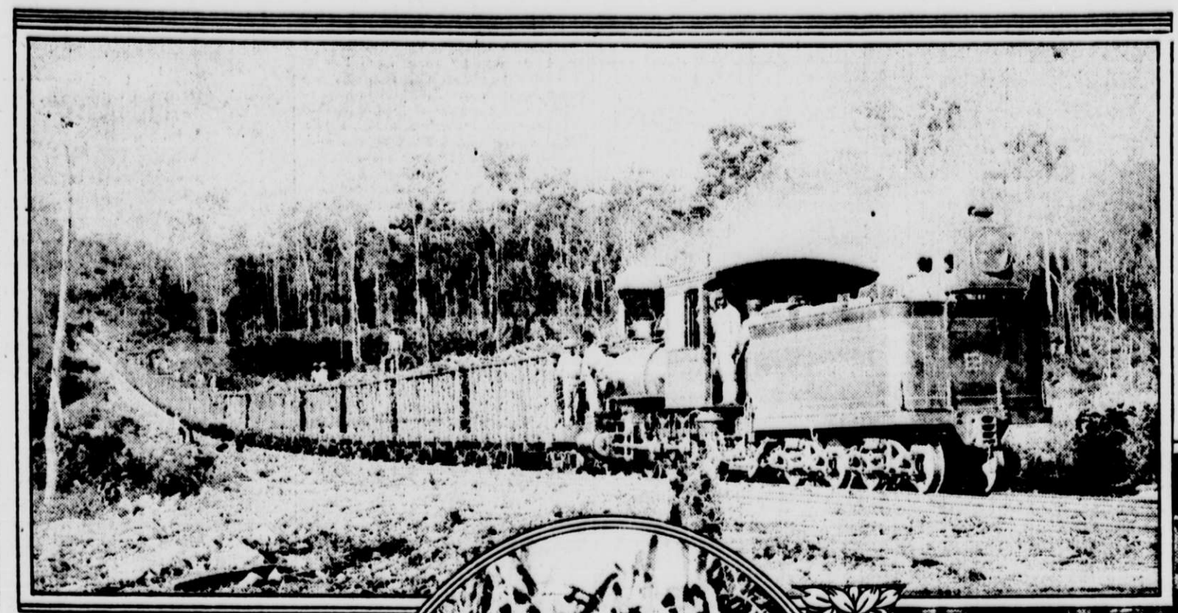
The steadying hand of the big republic was there for the little Antillan democracy to lean upon a while and then it was told to march on alone. And it has marched and bids fair, if reason rules, to become the richest garden on God's footstool.

What part the native Cuban of the older stock will have in this great prosperity of the coming years is his own lookout. He has his economical fate in his own hands. The tropical tendency is toward the limiting of labor to the absolutely necessary. Nature is so generous that a minimum of toil suffices for existence, and where the cold, invigorating winds of the temperate zones blow so seldom the coaxing call of the hammock, the drowsy hum of the siesta become irresistible to ears long attuned to their sense clowing harmonies.

The Cuban may climb from farm-hand to farmer, from farmer to mill owner, as the Spaniards have. But will he? One thing may waken him and keep him awake, eager, persistent and able—the growth of higher standards of living around him, the urge for better housing, better furnishing, better clothing, the hunger for education, that great key to opportunity. The desire must possess them to make finer men and women of their children than Providence and circumstances made of their parents. Ambition must grow and spread—ambition, the sense of the day after to-morrow.

One thing is surprising, namely, that the island's population has not kept step with its advance in wealth. The 2,500,000 of the Cuba of to-day should be 4,000,000; but increase lags. Immigration seems difficult. No process of sifting old citizens or newcomers from the cities to the fields seems to be in operation. Americans arriving are for the factory, the workshop, the store or the office; no farmers come, and here is the ideal land for farmers if the thing is undertaken on scale and according to a thought out system. Three crops a year for garden truck. How's that?

Manuel Rionda is my authority for saying that the sugar fields of Cuba may be increased to three times their present area by using the undeveloped acres of the eastern provinces of Camaguey and Oriente. The great new plantations in those provinces, mostly of American financing, are monuments of success. They can meet the lowest prices for sugar with the certainty that they can still win a living profit. Just now they are fairly wallowing in surplus earnings.



A train load of sugar cane on the way to market.

Sugar cane in Cuba higher than the head of a man on horseback.

Weighing raw sugar under government supervision. Photo by Brown Bros.

HOW THE "MASKED MARVELS" OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENT FIGHT SMOKE

Some Adventures of the Rescue Squad, Which Is Supplied With Protecting Helmets and Oxygen Tanks

AT midnight on February 6 last, while firemen were throttling a blaze in a business building at 442 Pearl street, the cry of a man whose lungs were already full of smoke floated up from the depths of the cellar of the building next door, No. 440.

The man was Bernard Myles, an engineer of the fire patrol, who had crept into the cellar to open a sewer whereby the flood caused by a broken main and augmented by a cataract from the high pressure streams of the firemen could be drained away. His mission accomplished, he tried to retrace his steps to the front of the pit, but the choking smoke of drugs, oils and hops forced him back.

Pulling his hat over his face and pressing his crooked elbows against the hat as a shield, he gulped a few breaths in a corner as yet unpoisoned by smoke and again tried to fight his way to the stairs that meant deliverance. Again he had to retreat, his eyes blinded, his lungs seared by noxious inhalations. Staggering to the rear wall of the cellar, he encountered a current of pure air.

Hope flashed within him. In the darkness he groped his way, following the precious draught, only to find that it came from a grating formed by steel bars. Smoke now pervaded the whole cellar. Myles had just strength enough to shout "Help! Help!" as he fell unconscious to the floor.

The call was heard. In a few minutes men were pounding at the grating, but not a bar could be loosened by the ordinary wrecking apparatus of the Fire Department. It was a time for emergency measures. The Fire Department had no such measures a year ago, but has them now.

A blinding, crackling light flamed above the grating. The stubborn steel reddened, turned to white, sullenly curled and melted. Through the aperture thus made dropped men wearing helmets like those of a deep sea diver, with curious sacks on their chests. They seized Myles and pushed him up through the grating into the eager hands of their comrades on the sidewalk. Immediate application of the pulmotor completed the saving of a life.

"One more minute in that cellar and we'd have had a dead man," Capt. McElligott said as he tucked the pulmotor into his automobile.

Thus the rescue squad of the Fire Department works. With its protective helmets, its oxygen torch, its oxygen cylinders, life guns, axes and pulmotors it is regarded as the most useful organization in the department. And the squad is not yet a year old. It celebrates its first birthday next Wednesday.

Six months after he became Fire Commissioner, long before the armies of Europe had been driven by necessity to adopt the smoke helmet, Robert Adamson decided that special men with special apparatus were needed to combat peculiar fire conditions. For shutting off ammonia when pipes burst in cold storage plants, for entering and ventilating chemical factories, for reaching the seat of flames in smoky cellars and subcellars, for rescuing persons overcome by deadly fumes, for fighting fires where the usual methods were vain—for this the rescue squad was organized. Since March 8, 1915, it has been scurrying about the city in its specially designed motor car, saving life and property that would have been lost in the ordinary course of events, giving to fire fighting a new picturesqueness, winning a reputation for its members as the "masked marvels" of the Fire Department.

The presence of ammonia gas after explosions in cold storage plants presents an ugly problem. About all the regular firemen can do to meet it is to stand outside the building and play the hose until the flames are quenched and the gas is dissipated. Take the fire at 109 Horatio street on April 26, 1915, as an example.

When the ordinary firemen reached the scene ammonia fumes kept them away from the seat of the fire. They could hear the gas hissing under great pressure. An explosion seemed imminent. It was reported that persons had been overcome in the cellar.

Down the street clanged Capt. John J. McElligott and his rescue squad in their automobile. Instructed to shut off the ammonia flow at any cost, they donned their smoke helmets and bags of oxygen and jumped into the building. They found the pipes, shut off the gas, flung open the windows, and in five minutes the place was ventilated so that the firemen could enter and go to work.

Thick acrid smoke still filled the upper floors. Upstairs went the rescue squad to complete their job of exploration and ventilation.

At Ruppert's brewery, 205 East Ninety-second street, is the largest ammonia installation in the country. A two inch supply pipe burst on August 15, 1915, and the vicious gas percolated every corner of the big building. It had taken eight hours to repair a similar break a few months before, but this time the rescue squad did the trick in eight minutes.

On the following day the squad was rushed to the Hotel Biltmore. There had been an explosion in the subcellar. Ammonia gas was escaping in great quantities. Without losing their stride the members of the squad, protected by their headgear, assured of life by the oxygen tubes attached to the helmets, dashed into the subcellar, cut off the flow of gas and found the dead body of Leo Rigert, an employee of the hotel, wedged between pipes above a condenser.

The members of the rescue squad work in pairs so they may protect each other. If one is overcome the other yanks a life line, the other end of which is held by another member of the squad in a position of safety. It is like the life line used by the diver exploring a wreck.

Often the fire rescuers have to depend upon their lump of location to find their way about. At times they get lost and have to be pulled back to their starting point in order to make a fresh start. Sometimes they are called upon to rescue comrades in the regular branches of the Fire Department. Their pulmotors have resuscitated many a firemen whom smoke has struck down.

One of the substances used in European gas warfare—acid sulphur chloride—puffed into the faces of the men who fought a fire at 561 West Fifty-eighth street on September 7, 1915. Suffocating fumes spouted from a leaking drum in the cellar. The rescue squad hoisted the drum from the cellar, drew off the acid into pails and poured it into carboys in the street.

Their boots and clothes, saturated by the fumes, fell to pieces as they worked, and nickel flaked off their helmets. The hands of some of the men were burned. It is not hard to imagine the fate of these daredevils if they had braved the cellar without their bags of oxygen and their helmets.

There was an acid fire at 306 Canal street on April 22, 1915, when the squad was only a few weeks old. The firemen who reached the spot first were driven from the building. Then the rescue squad formed a bucket brigade and bailed nitric and sulphuric acid from big tanks and spilled it into the street. As on the other occasion uniforms were disintegrated. One of the squad lost all his teeth and a captain had to retire from active service as the result of this experience and others were ill for a long time.

Fires on vessels on the waterfront have given the members of the squad rare exercise for their skill. To cut a hole through the steel deck of a ship is the work of a few seconds for the oxygen torch, and through the hole pour water and men to keep the fire from spreading.

A cargo of sugar in the ship Cragside was burning fiercely at the foot of West Twenty-third street on July 24, 1915. Heat and smoke kept the fire companies at a distance. Enter the rescue squad. Before its devouring torch a steel plate gives way. A line of hose is dropped into the hold, the seat of the blaze located and drenched, and the fire is over. Many a ship in such circumstances has been flooded and sunk at her pier, but not since the masked marvels went into commission.

Usually the squad is summoned only on extraordinary fire assignments. But on January 29 of this year it turned out to save a horse that had got stuck inside an iron railing and was in danger of having its legs broken. In five minutes the Blau gas torch of the rescue squad had cut the bars and the horse struggled to freedom unharmed.

The squad has responded to eighty-six alarms. In addition to special calls to any part of the city it turns out to first alarms from thirty-three stations in the most hazardous manufacturing neighborhoods. When the nature of the fire does not demand the use of its special equipment the squad performs any fire duty to which it may be assigned. Its headquarters are in the house of Engine Company 33, in Great Jones street.

This is the squad: John J. McElligott, captain; Edwin A. Hotchkiss, lieutenant; John F. Mooney, James Shaw, Alfred Kunella, Alfred V. Henrety, Frank C. Clark, John P. Ryan, Thomas Kilbride, Walter A. O'Leary, William A. Dorrie and Francis Glossing.

Rescue squad preparing to descend into a smoky cellar, a kind of fire fighting in which they are particularly effective. Note the smoke helmets and oxygen tanks strapped to their backs.

The rescue squad fighting ammonia fumes. One function of the squad is to shut off the supply of gas so that firemen can fight the fire.